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## Reasons Internalism, Hegelian Resources

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# Reasons Internalism, Hegelian Resources

## **Abstract**

Are normative reasons based in our desires, or are they instead grounded in our rational faculties? A familiar way of approaching this question focuses on the fact that individuals are often motivated by very different concerns. Our desires seem to provide us with operative or motivating reasons that are not shared by others, and the question is whether desires can also provide us with different good or normative reasons. Reasons internalism is the view that an agent's normative reasons for action must be within the reach of his or her interest and understanding. Many contemporary followers of Hume as well as Kant endorse this view, but their versions of internalism differ in one key respect. The Humean view is that reasons are relative to the particular motivations of individuals and thus not universally shared. In contrast, the Kantian view is that being fully rational involves converging on reasons that all agents share as such. But what is common to both of these versions of reasons internalism is a focus on the relative powers of the faculties of reason and desire.

Hegel, however, introduces an interesting and distinctive way of approaching the question of the source or grounding of normative reasons. Instead of focusing exclusively on the relative powers of inner faculties, Hegel proposes that what we have reasons to do depends largely upon how we understand ourselves within an actual social space. We will consider three different versions of this claim, the most plausible of which sheds new light on reasons internalism. We need not think that there are only two possibilities: either reasons are universal or they are relative to subjective motivations. Instead, what distinguishes a Hegelian approach is the contention that what counts as normative depends in part upon fundamental self-conceptions that we share as participants in a complex social world.

## **Keywords**

Reasons, Internalism, Framework, Practical Identity, Hegel

## **Disciplines**

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## **Comments**

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Are normative reasons based in our desires, or are they instead grounded in our rational faculties? A familiar way of approaching this question focuses on the fact that individuals are often motivated by very different concerns. Our desires seem to provide us with operative or motivating reasons that are not shared by others, and the question is whether desires can also provide us with different good or normative reasons. Reasons internalism is the view that an agent's normative reasons for action must be within the reach of his or her interest and understanding. Many contemporary followers of Hume as well as Kant endorse this view, but their versions of internalism differ in one key respect. The Humean view is that reasons are relative to the particular motivations of individuals and thus not universally shared. In contrast, the Kantian view is that being fully rational involves converging on reasons that all agents share as such. But what is common to both of these versions of reasons internalism is a focus on the relative powers of the faculties of reason and desire.

Hegel, however, introduces an interesting and distinctive way of approaching the question of the source or grounding of normative reasons. Instead of focusing exclusively on the relative powers of inner faculties, Hegel proposes that what we have reasons to do depends largely upon how we understand ourselves within an actual social space. In this paper we will consider three different versions of this claim, the most plausible of which sheds new light on reasons internalism. We need not think that there are only two possibilities: either reasons are universal or they are relative to subjective motivations. Instead, what distinguishes a Hegelian approach is the contention that what counts as normative depends in part upon fundamental self-conceptions that we share as participants in a complex social world.

## **1. Reasons Internalism**

Desires are facts about how we are oriented toward the world. Why, then, should we think that there is a necessary connection between a person's desires, broadly conceived, and what she has

good reasons to do? Reasons externalism is the view that agents have certain reasons whether or not they are capable of identifying and being motivated by those reasons.<sup>1</sup> The internalist response, in contrast, is concerned with what makes normative claims legitimately authoritative. In general terms, reasons internalism is the view that whatever counts as legitimately normative should not be beyond one's interest and understanding.

More specifically, reasons internalism is usually understood as the view that if someone has a reason to act in some way, then he or she must be capable of being motivated to act on that reason. Central to both Kantian and Humean versions of reasons internalism is the idea that there is a necessary connection between reasons and motivations. In this section we will examine this focus on motivation; in the subsequent sections a new focus and a distinctively Hegelian version of internalism will be proposed. Throughout, we will be wholly concerned with normative *pro tanto* reasons. These are considerations that count in favor of actions but often do not demand an action or show what is required. One might, for instance, have good reasons for skipping a meeting even though one still ought to go. Such reasons have normative weight, but they may lack the stronger or overriding force that we attribute to claims about what ought to be done. Proponents of internalism focus on these *pro tanto* reasons as the basic units of normative consideration.

The starting point for Humean versions of reasons internalism is Hume's contention that the faculty of reason is, on its own, motivationally inert. Hume argues that the powers of reason are much more circumscribed than his rationalist predecessors supposed, and he proposes that normative claims have their source in passion instead of the faculty of reason. Contemporary followers of Hume advocate versions of reasons internalism that reflect and build upon this view.<sup>2</sup> Humean versions of reasons internalism are comprised of two connected claims. First, if an agent cannot become motivated to act on the basis of some consideration, then that consideration cannot count as a reason for him or her. Second, what agents can become motivated to do depends upon

how they are already actually motivated. The idea is that when we deliberate, we do so relative to our subjective motivational sets. Existing motivations direct both deliberation and any generation of new motivations that occurs as a result of deliberation. All motivations are linked as in a chain, each dependent upon those that preceded it. Though we can acquire new motivations in deliberation, it is possible only relative to the motivations we already possess.

One problem with such an approach is that it introduces an objectionable sort of relativism. We might think, for instance, that an agent who is physically capable but highly unmotivated to save a drowning child still has at least some reason to do so under normal circumstances, and no appeal to the particular motivations of the individual can change that. But advocates of Humean versions of internalism instead propose the opposite, namely that each individual's reasons are relative to the contents of his or her subjective motivational set. This is a point that Bernard Williams concedes about a similarly extreme example, that of a person who abuses his spouse and would not become motivated to stop doing so even after due deliberation. Such a person, Williams contends, cannot be said to have any reason to cease his abuse.

This response, however, amounts to a denial that there is a necessary connection between reasons and the rightness of actions. Reasons are supposed to normatively count in favor of actions, but not in the way we might expect. Instead of being considerations that contribute to an action being right or wrong, reasons merely express how it would be rational for one to act in light of one's desires. Mark Schroeder has recently developed an amended Humean account in response to critiques of Williams on this point. There seem to be, Schroeder suggests, some desires that are part of every individual's subjective motivational set. The existence of such desires may help to explain why everyone has at least some reason to, for example, save a drowning child. But this response still leaves a second problem of intersubjective authority: why should we recognize the motivations of others as reason-giving, even if some of our motivations also overlap with theirs? Humean versions

of internalism come with a steep price tag: if we accept their psychological relativism, then it is unclear why we should think that the authority of reasons extends beyond each individual. When different subjective motivational sets happen to overlap, agents will often have similar reasons. But why should others therefore recognize such reasons as normative?

Kantian versions of internalism, in contrast, reflect a radically different understanding of the powers of the faculty of reason.<sup>3</sup> Their point of departure is Kant's rejection of the idea that the faculty of reason is motivationally inert. Like Humean versions, Kantian versions of internalism are comprised of two claims. First, if an agent has a reason to act in some way, then he or she can become motivated to act on the basis of that reason. Second, the faculty of pure reason can motivate agents to act on their reasons, regardless of how they are already motivated.

Notice that the first Kantian claim is logically equivalent to the first Humean claim above, but the second claim is markedly different. Kantian versions of internalism are formulated to explicitly deny that what we have reasons to do is relative to subjective motivations. The Kantian claim is instead that it is rational for agents to be motivated by certain considerations whether or not they actually are so motivated. Insofar as we possess a faculty of pure reason, we are capable of doing what we have reasons to do, and our actual motivations do not limit what we are capable of becoming motivated to do.

Christine Korsgaard formulates this view in terms of a requirement that reasons claims, in order to count as such, must be capable of motivating us as rational beings. In each individual's motivational set, she contends, there is a capacity to be motivated by pure practical reason. But since it is unclear how a capacity could count as a member of any set of motivations, this can be more plausibly rendered as a claim that there exists a commitment in every agent's motivational set to deliberate using the faculty of pure reason. We each, then, possess a faculty of pure practical reason which both enables us to deliberate by radically distancing ourselves from all of our actual

wants and interests, and is capable of motivating us to act on the basis of that deliberation, independent of our other wants and interests.

Kant's response to Hume's apparent psychological relativism thus gives rise to a more rationalist version of reasons internalism. But this response also comes with a steep price tag. It rests upon an extraordinarily robust account of the powers of reason, the justification for which is part of the larger Kantian edifice. We must accept Kant's contention that practical reason can be pure, employed in isolation from sense experience, legislating principles that have their source in reason alone. We must concede that pure reason motivates by inspiring in us respect for our ability to deliberate independent of everything empirical about ourselves. At least on Korsgaard's version, we must also grant that all agents have, in our subjective motivational sets, a commitment to using that faculty. Some find these claims entirely plausible, but they do leave proponents of internalism with limited options. We must, it seems, endorse a robust Kantian system in order to avoid the psychological relativism of a Humean approach.

Moreover, both versions of internalism are rather narrowly focused on the question of whether the faculty of reason can motivate us independently of our subjective desires. What unites the two versions is the idea that there is a necessary connection between reasons and motivations: every agent must, in the course of optimally rational deliberation, be capable of being motivated by his or her reasons. This idea appears in the distinctively Kantian version as part of an argument that has the form of *modus ponens*, the conclusion of which is that our subjective motivations do not condition our reasons. In contrast, the idea appears in the distinctively Humean version as part of an argument with the form of *modus tollens*, the conclusion of which is that we do not have reasons to do anything we cannot be motivated to do. The only significant point of difference, then, is in how they conceive of the relative powers of our inner faculties.



Yet what makes internalism appealing is the broader claim that we must be capable of accessing and ascribing our reasons to ourselves. We must be able to identify our reasons as our own if they are to count as reasons at all. Certainly our rational and motivational faculties play a crucial role in enabling us to identify with our reasons. But focusing only on the interplay of inner faculties as such has led to ignoring something that is also central to the issue at hand, namely the inescapably social character of our reasons.

## **2. A Different Approach**

The Hegelian contention is that ethical theory must take more seriously the extent to which we are fundamentally social creatures. This would shift the focus of the debate from determining the relative powers of inner faculties toward considering the social constitution of normative claims. Why should we think that what counts as a reason can be spelled out without reference to our actual social contexts? Our values and self-understandings are not timeless, but rather constantly developing through our interactions with one another. The Hegelian thesis is that our reasons depend on how we understand our agency and what might constitute the best realization of that agency. These fundamental self-understandings are neither universal nor particular to individuals just as such.

Understood in a weak sense, this is an idea that many followers of Kant and Hume will not find objectionable. If the thesis is merely that we depend on the existence of certain external social and material conditions in order to be able to deliberate well, then it is not especially controversial. Like basic material goods, basic social goods enable us to fully exercise our faculties. Someone who lacks access to important material or social goods may have great difficulty or even be incapable of deliberating well. But this is not the Hegelian thesis, though it is also not a point that Hegel would deny. The thesis is rather stronger: what can count as a reason for someone depends in part on how

that person is situated within a concrete social space. Our actual social contexts do not simply provide external conditions that enable the use of inner faculties we possess in virtue of being agents. Rather, having reasons involves being situated within a specific social space in which certain kinds of normative claims are offered, exchanged and evaluated. It is only relative to such a social space that something can come to count as a reason at all.

Consider the notion of an ideal rational deliberator that plays a crucial role in contemporary Kantian and Humean accounts. It is supposed to explain how individual agents are capable of becoming motivated by their reasons, and it provides a means, a decision procedure, for determining what one's reasons are. One need only imagine what an ideally rational version of oneself, drawing upon one's rational and motivational faculties, would determine that he or she has reasons to do. But what role do actual social contexts play in such ideally rational deliberation? Presumably social context influences both the content of our desires and the content of the maxims we might formulate to test using the Categorical Imperative. But to what extent is deliberation itself guided or structured by elements of one's context?

In at least many cases, solitary and introspective deliberation is insufficient for determining what one has reasons to do. Perhaps Lucy wants to determine what steps she should take to revive a troubled marriage. But she has difficulty imagining what she might do and remains stumped. Because she is not sufficiently imaginative, she cannot determine what her fully rational self would do. Thus she has reasons to do things that she does not in fact desire to do because she does not yet know they are. The only way, it seems, that she might determine what she has reason to do is to become exactly what she is not, namely optimally rational. Yet Lucy is not without resources that might help her to reflect further. When we deliberate, we often turn to others for insight and advice. Doing so enables us to envision new solutions to the dilemmas we face, but also to better

understand the nature of the dilemmas themselves. Lucy may thus be able to learn to deliberate better and to access reasons she could not see before.

This example reflects the sorts of actual resources and challenges that agents encounter in deliberation. We turn to others to help us identify our reasons, and how we are situated in an actual social world guides our deliberation in important ways. This is a point that Hegel makes repeatedly, arguing that an introspective paradigm of deliberation depends upon an implausibly thin conception of the individual as isolated from social contexts. What is lost is a fuller account of humans as beings whose deliberation is embedded in and inseparably part of our concrete identities, relationships, practices and institutions.<sup>4</sup> Instead, he proposes, our deliberation is shaped and structured by shared principles and self-understandings as they are embodied in our social contexts. For Lucy at least, becoming a better or more optimally rational deliberator depends in large part upon the actual identities, relationships, institutions and practices to which she has recourse. Such elements of social context are essential to how we understand the situations we face and to how we deliberate about those situations.

The insight that elements of our social contexts guide deliberation is one that plays a prominent role in Michael Bratman's work.<sup>5</sup> Bratman has convincingly argued that plans, intentions and policies provide frameworks that structure our deliberation about reasons and actions. These frameworks coordinate and organize various aspects of our lives, both as individuals and in relation to one another. They provide levels of stability, coherence and consistency in our lives that would otherwise be unattainable. Bratman emphasizes that while some of these plans, intentions and policies operate only at the individual level, others are shared and interpersonal. He distinguishes between four distinctive kinds of frameworks: individual intentions about action, shared intentions about action, individual policies about what to count as a reason, and shared policies about what to count as a reason. Significantly, Bratman thinks that both individual and shared policies about what

to count as reasons are grounded in value judgments which are subject to intersubjective pressures. These pressures originate from the relationships, practices, and institutions in we participate in.

This is an important strength of Bratman's account: it recognizes, at least up to a point, that how we are situated in a concrete social world shapes what we count as valid reasons. Yet Bratman's account of agency persists in relying on an atomistic approach. He begins by imagining a simple creature with beliefs and desires, and then builds in increasingly sophisticated capacities of reflection and valuing. These capacities of reflection and valuing are themselves in no way supposed to be influenced or shaped by actual social contexts, but rather are directly necessitated by each individual's need for coherence, consistence and stability in her own deliberation. Bratman defines agency in terms of a determinate set of inner faculties, such that it is only the exercise of these faculties which is subject to such external intersubjective pressures.

Bratman is one of a small but growing number of Kantian thinkers interested in understanding how elements of social contexts can influence deliberation. Barbara Herman argues that both whether and how we develop moral competence depends upon how we are situated in an actual social world.<sup>6</sup> But on her view, the capacities that constitute rational agency still exist as such independent of the social contexts in which they operate. Our rational faculties themselves are pre-social. David Velleman similarly argues that social interaction is essential to good moral deliberation, since the social world is where we express our agency.<sup>7</sup> Social life, he explains metaphorically, represents a layer of topsoil resting upon the bedrock of our inner faculties. That bedrock, our agency, is constituted independently of whatever social life happens to be in place. Like Herman and Bratman, Velleman thus acknowledges that we are social, but only up to a point. The exercise of our faculties is understood to be shaped or guided by elements of the social world, but the inner faculties themselves are still conceived as pre-socially constituted.

The Hegelian contention, in contrast, is that our sociality goes deeper than the sorts of social influences that Bratman, Herman, and Velleman have in mind. It is true that our judgments and our moral competences are subject to social influence. But the stronger claim is that what it is to be an agent is itself intersubjectively constituted. There is no pre-social individual or self that just happens to be placed in one social context or another; instead, we are social all the way down, and even our most fundamental faculties and self-understandings are constituted in relation to one another. We can distinguish between three different interpretations of this claim. The most plausible one extends Bratman's framework metaphor while casting doubt on approaches that rely upon an atomistic approach to understanding deliberation and reasons.

The first way of interpreting the Hegelian focus on social context is as a claim that consensus in one's community, just as such, determines one's reasons. As Karl Popper famously pointed out, Hegel sometimes seems to suggest that individuals should blindly trust to the institutions and norms in their communities.<sup>8</sup> Suppose that Lucy consults the experts in her life and is advised to adopt what we judge to be oppressive gender roles. As it turns out, there is a consensus amongst the members of her community that women should adopt such gender roles, and even that doing so is necessary to the health of a marriage. This example conjures up the specter of a relativism which takes reasons to depend on existing social norms instead of individual desires as such. Indeed, Alasdair MacIntyre agrees with what he takes to be Hegel's view that reasons are relative to elements of social context.<sup>9</sup>

As we will see, MacIntyre is correct; there is an unavoidable relativism to the Hegelian approach. But this relativism does not require that we treat norms, just as such, as reason-giving. Clearly the fact that others have come to do things in some way does not imply that one has normative grounds for doing so as well. This recalls an oft-repeated criticism of Humean approaches that figured prominently in our discussion of the Humean version of internalism. It is unclear how a mere fact

about oneself, namely the possession of certain particular desires, could impart normative justification to actions. It may be true that it is rational for Lucy to act in certain ways in order to satisfy her desires, but that does not imply that she has normative reasons to do so. We can make a similar point about a different sort of fact about us, namely our social contexts. It is hard to see how just the fact that Lucy lives one in community gives her normative reasons to be submissive to men, when she would not have such reasons if she instead lived in a different community.

Hegel is well aware that his focus on social context might be construed as a claim that the norms prevalent in one's community determine the one's reasons, and he explicitly denies that this is his view.<sup>10</sup> We often question norms and expectations as they present themselves to us, and it is essential to the legitimacy of those norms and expectations that they be capable of surviving rational reflection. "Man must meet with his own reason," Hegel contends, and a law "is not valid simply because it exists."<sup>11</sup> But what, then, might it mean to claim that reasons are dependent upon or relative to social context if not that community norms determine the contents of one's reasons?

A second reading of Hegel is more plausible but still flawed. Focusing on the notion of a concrete practical identity comes noticeably closer to capturing what is interesting about a Hegelian approach. We understand ourselves at least in part in terms of our relationships, our participation in practices and institutions, our membership in organizations, and so forth. Anthony Laden has recently proposed a thoughtful Hegelian account, according to which some reasons are grounded in such concrete practical identities.<sup>12</sup> These reasons, which he calls social reasons, derive their normative authority directly from participation in specific relationships, projects and institutions. Adopting the practical identity of parenthood, for example, gives agents reasons that are not shared by all rational agents as such. Someone who does not share in this identity is not guided by the normative considerations which are specific to the identity. Laden argues that because adopting a practical identity can fundamentally transform who one is, doing so can also transform what one

takes to be most important and valuable, and thus what one has reasons to do. On this view, at least some of our reasons are relative to the particular relationships, projects, and institutions that form our identities.

As a reading of Hegel, this view has merit. Hegel's ethical and political thought is marked by a focus on the kinds of actual relationships, practices, and institutions that shape our lives. Occupying a central place in his writings is the idea that participation in concrete forms of social life is transformative of who we are. But there is a real difficulty that accompanies the attempt to view some or all reasons as relative to concrete practical identities just as such. What justifies adopting a particular identity in the first place? Not all practical identities are equal, and history as well as the present-day is rife with examples of identities that we judge to be objectionable. Understanding oneself as a wife in Lucy's community, for instance, seems to involve recognizing that there are reasons to be subservient. According to Laden, the notion of a practical identity is supposed to replace the Humean notion of a subjective motivational set as underlying our social reasons. But are reasons, then, supposed to be relative to contingent facts about whether one happens to hold one practical identity or another? It is unclear how the fact that one identifies oneself through participation in a particular practical identity implies that one thereby has reasons that are specific to that identity.

### **3. Frameworks of Understanding**

A Hegelian approach, if it is to be successful, must contend with the normative gap between reasons and facts about social context. What Laden gets right is that our reasons depend in some way upon how we understand ourselves in relation to others within an actual social space. But instead of focusing on concrete practical identities as such, we should examine the higher-level self-conceptions that underlie practical identities. The claim that we are social all the way down applies

also to the deep self-understandings that inform and connect our practical identities together. In this section we will consider two distinctively Hegelian theses: First, fundamental self-understandings provide shared frameworks, within which we reason, desire, make and evaluate normative claims. Second, these self-understandings are not timeless and universal; rather, they are continually developing as we collectively work out what it means to be an agent and what might constitute the best realization of that agency.

Consider the thesis that fundamental self-understandings provide shared frameworks for reasoning, desiring, formulating, and deliberating about normative claims. These frameworks are, in key respects, like architectural frameworks. A building, a house for instance, has a specific structure and architectural design. This structure provides a space in which people live, framing that space in one way rather than in other possible ways. Within the structure, the inhabitants must make particular decisions about how to divide the space and arrange furniture. The structure does provide some guidelines about how these tasks might be accomplished, but it does not determine whether the couch should be placed over here or over there. Those sorts of decisions must be made, and later revisited and revised, by the people living in the structure. Such a framework is, in other words, underdetermining. It provides a space and some orientation within that space, but agents must work out how to live and act in concrete terms within that framework.

The Hegelian proposal is that certain shared self-understandings function in an analogous way: they frame our understanding of what sorts of considerations might be capable of counting as reasons. Within a framework, we make and evaluate reasons claims, working out for ourselves precisely what counts as normative. What are the fundamental self-understandings that can provide such a framework? Hegel grappled repeatedly with the problem of identifying and describing the self-conceptions that provide the sorts of frameworks he had in mind. Running throughout his work, however, we find an emphasis on the importance of how we conceive of our agency and what



might count as the best realization of that agency. We understand ourselves not just in terms of concrete practical identities such as spouse, colleague, and friend, but also as agents who reason in certain ways and who are capable of achieving certain fundamental kinds of goods.

The most basic self-understanding that frames the lives of agents in modern life, Hegel contends, is the conception of oneself as capable of living a free and self-determined life. This is freedom understood as the ability to determine for ourselves which actions can be justified, and to develop and use normative standards that are not just imposed by others. On this point, Hegel was very much influenced by Kant and Rousseau. But Hegel also realizes that a deep commitment to the value and importance of this conception of freedom is specifically characteristic of modernity. Modern agents insist on critically reflecting on and evaluate the claims that others make, and we insist upon our capacity for self-governance. In modern life, freedom is not just one value amongst many; rather we understand ourselves as essentially self-determining agents. In Hegel's terminology, freedom is the "idea" that underlies modern life.<sup>13</sup> By this he means not just that freedom is a concept that we have available to us. Rather, it is a concept that organizes our thought about ourselves and finds expression in virtually every facet of our lives. For modern agents especially, what it means to be an agent is understood largely in terms of this thick conception of oneself as capable of self-governance.

But is this conception of agency, with its emphasis on self-determination, really unique to modern life? Hegel's claim is not that pre-modern agents had no conception of freedom, but rather that earlier conceptions of freedom were different from ours in three important ways.<sup>14</sup> First, they held that only some individuals were free, and that most did not have this status.<sup>15</sup> As a citizen or a land owner one could have freedom and rights, but not in virtue of being a human being. Second, pre-modern conceptions of freedom emphasized only limited forms of freedom, that some individuals should be free from certain forms of coercion. Hegel points to the Roman legal system,

in which citizens were granted negative personal and legal rights, as emblematic of this conception of freedom.<sup>16</sup> Third, while an insistence on freedom and self-determination may not be unique to the modern era, it is more widespread and essential to our self-understandings than ever before. At least in the European tradition, the idea that all individuals ought to be free from coercion arose and became pervasive in response to authoritarian political and religious institutions that denied the right of dissent. This in turn led to a widespread insistence on both political and moral self-governance that is especially prominent in modernity.

Though not explicitly Hegelian, J.B. Schneewind's work on the invention of the notion of self-governance in modernity lends support to this Hegelian interpretation of intellectual history.<sup>17</sup> Our conception of ourselves as capable of self-governance is not something that all agents at all times have shared. Rather, it took shape and developed in response to previous conceptions of agency that focused on obedience and authority. Today, the idea that every human being is capable of self-governance has increasingly taken hold in modern life and come to structure our lives in new and distinctive ways. This is not to deny the existence of real oppression in modern societies; modern practices can and often do fail to fully express our conception of freedom. On Hegel's view, actual practices are always more or less flawed expressions of basic self-understandings, depending on other historical and social factors.<sup>18</sup> Yet even with their flaws, our practices embody a distinctive type of social recognition, at the core of which is the idea that agents are capable of self-determination. This self-understanding is not a fact about all rational agents as such, but rather represents a still-developing conception of ourselves in relation to one another.

Our normative framework provides the context within which we adopt concrete practical identities, shaping the content of those identities and connecting the identities to one another. Many of our practical identities today are not unique to our current normative framework, but how we understand and practice those identities does reflect our fundamental self-understandings. The

identity of parenthood, for example, is not limited to a single normative framework. Individuals with radically different conceptions of their own agency have shared in this identity. But how exactly one conceives of that identity and goes about being a parent nonetheless depends in large measure on how one understands oneself in other ways, both in terms of other practical identities and in terms of higher-level conceptions of agency. Our normative framework provides a specific space within which we create, occupy, revise, and connect practical identities in order to make them our own.

At first glance, it might appear that Bratman's fourth type of framework, shared policies about which considerations count as reasons, already encompasses such higher-level normative frameworks. However, none of the frameworks discussed by Bratman encompasses the sort that we are considering here. We can see this by considering the relative scope of what is doing the framing and of what is being framed. The Hegelian proposal is that what are doing the framing are socially-constructed conceptions of agency and of what might constitute the good for such beings. What these frameworks structure is the normative space in which we make and evaluate reasons claims. Bratman's proposal, in contrast, is that what does the framing are plans, policies and intentions. What the frameworks structure are some aspects of our deliberation, but the frameworks are themselves supposed to be grounded in further, independent, judgments about value. Bratman's account thus captures the way in which plans and policies structure deliberation, but the Hegelian thesis is that the value judgments underlying such plans and policies are themselves framed by a thick conception of agency.

At the core of a Hegelian approach to ethics is the contention that who we are, both trivially and fundamentally, depends in part upon the recognition afforded to us by others. There is no pre-social self that can be defined independently of our participation in actual relationships, practices and institutions. From the moment we are born, we enter into a complex social space in which

reasons are exchanged and evaluated. We develop interests and faculties largely in response to how we are situated within this space. But more significantly, we also develop our self-understandings in relation to one another. Charles Taylor calls these self-interpretations, fundamental identities which are constitutive of our experience.<sup>19</sup> Even at the most fundamental level, our ideas about who we are and what is worthwhile develop through our interactions with others and in response to the actual reasons claims that we encounter within concrete social contexts.

This departs significantly from the idea that agency consists in the possession of a determinate set of faculties that we possess independent of actual social contexts. Hegel puts the point thus: “the individual finds concrete duties and social situations, which are what they are, before he entered them and which offer opportunities and demand fulfillments. The individual, in grasping those opportunities and fulfilling those demands of the situation, appropriates them as his own, makes himself essential to them.”<sup>20</sup> Hegel does not deny that we are indeed individuals with our own interests and values who must use our faculties to deliberate about how to act. But at the same time, who we already are and who we are striving to become depends to a large degree upon the social world in which we are situated. We define ourselves, at every level, in relation to one another. The resultant self-understandings are not static, but rather subject to constant revision as they are realized and expressed in our identities, relationships, practices, and institutions. Our social contexts do not determine everything about us, but they do play an important role in helping to constitute who we are, what we can do, and the judgments we make about what is worthwhile.

But even if this is correct, the normative gap between facts and reasons seems to re-emerge. Above it was argued that facts about practical identities such as spouse, parent, and colleague are, like facts about motivations, insufficient to ground normative claims. Do facts about frameworks of understanding, and specifically our modern framework, fare any better? How does Hegel propose that we might determine whether one framework is normatively better than others? In terms of the

architectural analogy, houses vary greatly, both in their design and in their actual physical structure. Some houses are clearly better than others, whether for practical or aesthetic reasons. Can we compare fundamental self-conceptions in the same way, holding up the modern idea of freedom as superior to other frameworks of understanding?

It is tempting to think that there must be some sort of a standard, outside of the frameworks in question, that we can use to show that ours is more legitimately reason-giving than others. We search for, as Hegel puts it, “some kind of presupposition which would serve as a grounding standard.”<sup>21</sup> Otherwise, the Hegelian approach seems to present an objectionable cultural relativism. The dilemma, then, is that either Hegel admits that there is an external standard for evaluating normative frameworks that is itself valid independent of any particular framework, or his view collapses into the claim that our reasons are determined by mere facts about how we happen to be situated and understand ourselves within a particular normative space.

Hegel attempts to steer a course between the two horns of this dilemma. He denies that there is any standard external to frameworks, but insists that this does not require us to treat all frameworks as normatively equivalent. Our modern conception of agency as self-determination developed in response to serious problems in the framework that preceded it, one which emphasized a need for strong authority and obedience. Today we take our framework to make more sense than the one that preceded it; we take our conception of agency to be better than previous conceptions. Hegel thinks that we are justified in doing so because our conception of agency is more rational than those that came before it. But what this means cannot be spelled out in terms of a timeless standard that is valid independent of that conception.

Instead, it is only by occupying our own actual standpoint that we can see the extent to which that standpoint is an improvement upon what came before. Specifically, we today can appreciate the problems associated with severely limited conceptions of freedom in a way that pre-modern agents

could not understand. But we do not thereby occupy the fabled Archimedean point; rather our standpoint is always internal to our own framework; it is internal to how we now understand ourselves and our agency. As Hegel puts it, “it is just as foolish to imagine that any philosophy can transcend its contemporary world as that an individual can leap over his own time.”<sup>22</sup>

The history of ideas is, on this view, one in which our self-understandings are not static, but rather constantly developing as we confront limitations in our own self-understandings. If we pay close attention to how, historically, successive frameworks arose and were later amended and revised, we can see more than mere change occurring. There is a progressive pattern of development, wherein conceptions of agency develop in response to the limitations of earlier conceptions. More specifically, each self-understanding emerges out of attempts to resolve difficulties that agents encountered in previous ones, in a way that is perhaps analogous to how architectural designs might develop in response to problems in previous designs. Within every framework thus far, perhaps even including our own, serious problems emerged as agents tried to live within them. In response to such conflicts, agents modified and ultimately discarded their old framework in favor of developing a new one that did not share the faults of the previous one. They then attempted to live within it, and the process began again.

Hegel emphasizes, however, that our location in the modern framework is not merely a contingent fact about us. This is because the framework has, for us, a rationale: it improves in significant ways upon the previous framework. Recognizing not just that our framework is socially-constructed but also how and why it has been constructed illuminates for us this underlying rationale. This rationale alone, of course, may not be sufficient; when we discover significant problems in our framework, it too must be revised and perhaps ultimately discarded. But even though we cannot step outside of our framework, there is a justification that we can give for why it is, at least for us, more rational than those that came before it. This justification does not imply that

our framework would be rational for all agents at all times, since there is no way of determining what would be rational independent of our shared conceptions of ourselves. Yet we do have grounds for thinking that this framework, though inescapably social, is not just a fact about us. Instead, it represents a collective achievement in the development of our self-understandings.

#### **4. Hegelian Internalism**

Let us now return to the question that opened this paper: are normative claims, and specifically reasons for action, based in our desires or instead grounded in our rational faculties? According to Kantian versions of internalism, our reasons are internal to the exercise of the faculty of pure reason. According to Humean versions, our reasons are internal to deliberation that occurs relative to desires. A Hegelian account of reasons, in contrast, focuses on the social constitution of agency rather than on the relative powers of these inner faculties. This shift in focus gives rise to a new version of reasons internalism, one that also incorporates a distinctively externalist component.

Like the Kantian and Humean versions of internalism, the Hegelian version is comprised of two claims. First, if an agent has a reason to act in some way, then it must be possible for him or her to act on the basis of that reason. Second, agents can only act on the basis of reasons that are available to them from within their shared normative frameworks. Notice that the first claim captures the idea that is at the heart of internalism: we must be capable of acting on our reasons, and so we must be capable of identifying our reasons as our own. But one distinctive feature of the Hegelian version of internalism is its focus on sociality rather than desires as such. Our reasons are social to begin with, and we must start there before proceeding to determine how we use our faculties to identify, reflect, and act on those reasons.

Another distinctive feature of the Hegelian version of internalism is that it is reflexive in the sense that it locates internalism within the modern self-understanding. When we contend that

reasons, in order to count as such, must be within the reach of our interest and understanding, we do so from within the context of our shared self-understandings. Other versions of internalism could be made consistent with the Hegelian version by being modified so as to accommodate this reflexivity. The Kantian claim that reason can motivate us independently of subjective motivations is consistent with recognizing that this claim refers to a thick conception of agency that is not timeless and universal. Similarly, the Humean claim that existing subjective motivational sets condition possible future motivations is consistent with recognizing that our self-understandings are socially-constructed and still developing.

In their current forms, however, the Kantian and Humean versions of internalism do conflict with the Hegelian version. We can see this by considering again the problem of the intersubjective authority of reasons: why, if reasons are relative to each individual's subjective desires, should others recognize those reasons as normatively authoritative? The Hegelian response is that that reasons depend on shared self-understandings rather than on desires just as such. Reasons derive their intersubjective authority, then, from the rationale that underlies these self-understandings. Their authority depends on the justification for our understanding of agency and what might constitute its best realization, and reasons lose their normative force if they depend upon self-understandings whose rationale we have come to reject.

This response, however, introduces an externalist component into the proposed account of reasons. There is an important sense in which the social world is external to the individual, imposing expectations, roles, and norms that are outside of or foreign to the self. If reasons are supposed to be dependent upon or relative to elements of that social world, then those reasons would also seem to be external. But without denying that real tensions exist between individuals and their social contexts, it would be a mistake to focus only on these tensions. Who we are is also constituted by our shared self-understandings, which are reflected in the actual identities,



relationships, institutions and practices in which we participate. The social world too is constituted by the self-understandings of actual individuals. The boundary between internal and external is fluid and permeable rather than fixed and rigid. By combining this insight with the specifically internalist contention that our reasons must be within the reach of our interest and understanding in order to count as such, we get a clearer view of how actual deliberation is shaped by shared self-understandings.

Recall the Lucy example. Oppressive gender norms cannot be justified precisely because they are oppressive. This claim is neither circular nor trivial: by pointing out that these norms are oppressive, we assert that participating in them does not best contribute to living a fully self-determined life. Our understanding of self-determination as well as oppression is continually developing, but this should not stop us from using it, in its current form, to evaluate actual reasons claims that we encounter. Practices and values that once seemed to help constitute self-determination can later be assessed in light of our revised understanding of self-determination. Analogously, a design element that once seemed to exemplify a structure's architectural style can later, after further developments, be revealed as misguided.

The crucial point is that we are not required to recognize all reasons claims as normatively authoritative just because they are located within a social space. We can acknowledge why others may have attributed normative authority to them without doing so ourselves. Though we have no timeless standard to appeal to when weighing reasons claims, we do have one that we have developed and are even still refining. We can engage in meaningful deliberation about whether a practice or a desire is self-determined even while being open to further revising our understanding of agency and what constitutes the good for agents. A Hegelian approach provides no decision procedure for determining our reasons, but it does leave us with resources for making and evaluating reasons claims. We have recourse not only to our individual faculties, but also to our

shared and still-developing idea of what it means to be an agent and what constitutes the best realization of that agency. Analogously, an architectural framework does not provide a decision procedure for how exactly its space should be used, but it does provide an evolving point of reference that guides the inhabitants as they initially work out and then continue to revise their use of the space. Similarly, our thick understandings of our own agency continually shape and are shaped by the social practices, identities, relationships and institutions in which we participate. Those self-understandings provide an evolving reference point that we use as we exchange and evaluate actual reasons claims.

The internalist claim is that reasons, in order to count as such, must be the sorts of considerations that agents could actually act on the basis of. The key insight is that what people have reasons to do is not alien to them. Our reasons must be such that we can identify them as our own; we must be capable of ascribing them to ourselves. Rather than construing this claim just in terms of the relative powers of inner faculties, the Hegelian version of internalism focuses on the shared self-understandings that frame the space in which we make normative claims. We are deeply social beings, Hegel suggests, and the task is to understand more clearly what implications this has for ethics. Working out these implications illuminates not only Hegel's thought, but also the internalist idea that reasons must be within the reach of our interest and understanding.<sup>23</sup>

## Notes

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1. See John McDowell, *Mind, Value & Reality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998); Frederick Stoutland, "The Real Reasons," in Jan Bransen and Stefaan E. Cuypers, eds., *Human Action, Deliberation and Causation* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998), pp. 43-66.

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2. See Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 101-114; Alan Goldman, "Reasons Internalism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 71 (2001); Christopher Cowley, "A New Defense of Williams's Reasons-Internalism," *Philosophical Investigations* 28 (2005); Mark Schroeder, *Slaves of the Passions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
  3. See Christine Korsgaard, "Skepticism about Practical Reason," *Journal of Philosophy* 83 (1986); Michael Smith, "Internal Reasons," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 55 (1995); Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).
  4. See G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), § 639ff; *Philosophy of Right*, trans. by H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1991), § 147ff.
  5. See Michael Bratman, *Structures of Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
  6. See Barbara Herman, *Moral Literacy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).
  7. See David Velleman, *How We Get Along* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
  8. See Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, op. cit., § 268.
  9. See Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Magic in the Pronoun 'My'," *Ethics* 94 (1983).
  10. See Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, op. cit., §316A.
  11. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, op. cit., p. 4.
  12. See Anthony Laden, "Evaluating Social Reasons: Hobbes versus Hegel," *Journal of Philosophy* 102 (2005).
  13. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, op. cit., §1.

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14. See Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, trans. by J. Sibree (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), pp. 252-3.
  15. See Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, op. cit., §356.
  16. See Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, op. cit., §357; *Phenomenology of Spirit*, op. cit., §477-83.
  17. See J.B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
  18. See Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, op. cit., § 258A.
  19. See Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
  20. G.W.F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of Philosophy (1817)*, trans. by Gustav Emile Mueller (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), §431.
  21. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, op. cit., §84.
  22. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, op. cit., p. 22.
  23. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association, at Iowa State University, and at Northwestern University. I am grateful to the audiences on these occasions for very beneficial discussions. Special thanks go to Terry Pinkard, Sally Sedgwick, Rachel Zuckert, Cullen Padgett Walsh, Erin Flynn, and three anonymous referees for their helpful comments, and to the German Academic Exchange Service (*DAAD*) for its support.